

## THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE PARSONS SITE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

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It has been fifty years since the first extensive archaeological investigations of the Iroquoian settlement of the Humber River watershed took place. Excavations at the Parsons site first took place in 1952 and involved many of the charter members of the *Ontario* Archaeological Society. Since that time, the site has achieved an almost mythical status if only as the place at which many still active, and now legendary, Northeastern archaeologists first cut their teeth. The site itself has also played an essential role in various reconstructions of Ontario's prehistory, despite the fact that relatively little of the settlement had been excavated, much less reported upon in detail. On the other hand, the site was assumed to be one of the larger villages in central Ontario and by the 1970s had yielded hundreds of thousands of artifacts, most of which remain in private collections.

Although the 1989-1990 excavations are the largest-scale investigations carried out to date at the site, they represent only about one-tenth of the village's estimated area. Furthermore, only one structure (House 5) can be said to have been exposed to a reasonably complete extent. These factors impose considerable limitations both on the possibility of reconstructing the developmental history of the village, and on the examination or interpretation of those distributional trends noted during the analyses of the various classes of artifacts recovered. Nevertheless, several general suggestions concerning the site may be offered and many of the myths associated with the site can be laid to rest.

On the basis of the settlement pattern data, the layout of the houses within the comparatively small excavated portion of the village attests to a high degree of organization and planning, although it is equally apparent that the community was also highly dynamic in character. It may be suggested that the initial construction of the regularly-spaced Houses 5, 3, 7 and 8 within the central portion of the site occurred as a more or less single event. Given

that there is some evidence for House 10 post-dating some exterior activity to the east of House 8, it may be that House 10 was erected somewhat later.

Although the relationship between the potentially earlier structures and the palisades remains uncertain, it is probable that the site was in fact enclosed from its earliest period of occupation, given the overall strategic location of the village on the bluffs overlooking the creek. To a certain degree, this assumption is also supported by the possibility that Midden 4 initially formed as a refuse deposit between the inner two rows of eastern palisades. Whether the construction of Houses 1, 2, and 6 also occurred at this same general time is also unclear. It should, however, be borne in mind that House 1 is unlikely to have served as a year-round residence.

The initial phase of construction may then have been followed by a period of in-filling, with the addition of House 4, as one or two short, narrow structures, between Houses 3 and 5, and with the building of House 9 between Houses 7 and 8. This phase may also correspond to a slight expansion of the primary occupation area with the construction of the more easterly five row palisade. It is equally likely, however, that refuse continued to accumulate in the area of Midden 4 in the innermost palisades.

That these two suggested phases represent a comparatively lengthy period of time is indicated by the apparent frequency with which many of the houses were modified: House 4 appears to represent the coalescence or replacement of two small, irregular structures; House 3 seems to have experienced one contraction; House 7 may have been extended once; and House 8 was extended or contracted on as many as three occasions. Similarly, the length of House 2 was altered at least once.

The relationships between Houses 3, 7, 9, and numerous exterior features all suggest that the site continued to be occupied following the abandonment of these residences. The

timing of this exterior activity, however, remains unclear. It is probable that much of this activity occurred within a reasonably short period of time, and was associated with the occupation of structures lying beyond the limits of the excavations.

House 4 also stands out as somewhat distinctive. Measuring only five metres in width, but at least 21 m in length, it is possible that this structure was proportioned to fit within the limited space available between the larger and earlier Houses 3 and 5. Furthermore, it would appear that the construction of the house occurred over at least two phases, involving a transition from two separate structures to a single one that incorporated architectural elements of the earlier structures. Thus, neither the structural design of House 4, nor its developmental history would appear to closely conform to the normative ideal of the Late Iroquoian longhouse. Nevertheless, these "anomalous" traits do not necessarily provide sufficient grounds for assigning a "special" or "ritual" function to the house, despite the fact that it also contained two semi-subterranean structures. While these structures likely fulfilled a number of specialized functions, the most detailed discussion of their use is the suggestion that they served as sweat lodges for ritual/curative purposes (Smith 1976; MacDonald 1988; 1992). The frequency with which these structures occur within longhouses suggests that their ritual role may have been a fundamental aspect of daily life in an Iroquoian household, especially if their use related to a curing society that functioned as a socially integrative institution within an emergent tribal system. Thus, the assumed distinction between the sacred and the secular, which often implicitly informs interpretation of the mere presence of these features in a house (e.g., Kapches 1994:97), is likely to have been more blurred and is possibly misleading.

With respect to its constituent artifact assemblages, the eastern side of the site stands out as distinctive in at least two respects. In particular, House 8 and the refuse deposits along the inner palisades (Feature 240, Midden 4-Feature 245) yielded the largest proportion of "exotic" ceramic vessels, including over 75 percent of types traditionally regarded as St. Lawrence Iroquoian, such as Durfee Under-lined and Roebuck Low Collar. Similarly, the presence of Dutch Hollow Notched and Lalon-

de High Collar vessels was also confined to House 8. This skewed distribution of the "exotic" ceramics may indicate that the occupants of House 8 maintained somewhat distinctive traditions of ceramic decoration from that characterizing the remainder of the community, or that their own external communication and exchange alliances were somewhat differently oriented from those of the other households in this area of the site. Whether or not these patterns resulted from St. Lawrence Iroquoian women actually arriving at Parsons with vessels in hand, through marriage or migration, is not known, although trace element analyses conducted on other vessels from the site, using the *University of Toronto* collection, and on pots from other fifteenth century north shore sites suggest that they were made locally or at least transported among north shore communities (Trigger et al. 1980:132). Also, at least one juvenile vessel with St. Lawrence Iroquoian decorative attributes suggests a local on-site tradition for the manufacture of at least some of these pots. In considering the various explanations for the presence of St. Lawrence Iroquoian ceramics in the Trent Valley (migration, trade, conquest, refugees), Ramsden (1990c:92-93) dismisses the "captured bride hypothesis" as both sexist (cf. Latta 1991) and out of keeping with the pattern of small-scale warfare that likely prevailed prior to the 1600s. He does not, however, consider the possibility of intro-community marriage. Such an explanation also avoids the sexist pitfalls of the "captured bride hypothesis," as it recognizes that marriage in Iroquoian society involved choice. Both males and females in Huron society participated in the selection and decision of whom they would marry (Trigger 1969:66). Moreover, during the historic period it is documented that matrilineal residence patterns (while perhaps preferred) were not necessarily always followed (Trigger 1976:46, 136) and females could travel from distant communities to marry and live with Huron men (Tooker 1964:127).

Whether the eastern portion of the village could therefore be said to form a distinct, ethnically-defined enclave or "barrio" within the overall settlement (e.g., Ramsden 1990b:382), on the basis of these distinctive distributional patterns, is a question that cannot be addressed in the absence of further excavation. The exposed portions of neither

House 9 nor House 10 yielded sufficient quantities of material to assist in the identification of any more widespread distinctions of this type. Furthermore, such an interpretive exercise must take into account the inherent difficulties of traditional assumptions concerning the existence of direct relationships between material culture attributes and ethnic identity. The interpretation of certain attributes as expressions of group identity or solidarity, in the absence of a clear understanding of their evolution and structural context, should not be made lightly (Williamson and Robertson 1994:27, 37-39).

It is interesting to note that the distribution of scattered human bone, although dispersed throughout the entire excavated area (Robertson, Williamson and Welsh, this volume: Table 27), is also biased (75 percent) towards the eastern portion of the settlement, again primarily concentrated within House 8, and along the inner palisade in Midden 4-Feature 245 and the refuse-filled depression represented by Feature 240. Little, if any, of this material bears indications of trauma that may be construed as decisive evidence for prisoner torture and sacrifice. The remains in the east palisade area were found in midden deposits, while those from House 8 were dispersed within the fill layers of a semi-subterranean sweat-lodge and from two house support posts.

Some of the House 8 remains, which embody only a portion of one or more individuals, appear to have been subjected to carnivore gnawing indicating that they had been exposed on the surface of the site for some time. Whether these remains constitute victims of violence, the disturbed and scattered remnants of burials that were exhumed for reinterment elsewhere, but from which not all elements were collected, or even relics or talismans (cf. Fitzgerald 1992:8; Thwaites 1896-1901; 21:199) cannot be determined.

The significance of the crania recovered from Feature 245 is equally difficult to assess. Eyewitness reports of Huron combat in the seventeenth century certainly suggest that the heads of some casualties were carried off from battle sites (Tooker 1964:31) and/or the heads of prisoners may have been consumed by low-status individuals in an effort to dishonour the victims (Tooker 1964:39), and the deposition of the two crania in a refuse context may be consistent with such practices. Yet, given the

liminal position of the two skulls, at the base the palisades and facing beyond the limits of the settlement, could not these remains also represent a deliberate deposit that was made with reverence rather than insult? In their detailed comparative analysis of four Iroquoian populations (Kleinberg, Uxbridge, Roebuck, Broughton Hill, New York), Dupras and Pratte (this volume) found that the two crania closely resemble one another and those from the Uxbridge ossuary. These data strongly suggest that the crania came from a local population rather than a more distant one. The possibility that these two skulls represent the remains of venerated members or ancestors of the community should not be dismissed out of hand. If, however, these remains are those of captive victims of torture and sacrifice, their affinity with the local population, as reflected by their resemblance to the Uxbridge ossuary community, would seem to indicate that feuding was taking place between neighbouring tribal systems. Such a finding would seem to run counter to the prevailing idea that the endemic conflict that characterized Late Iroquoian society was played out over long distances, such as between the geographically disparate Huron and St. Lawrence Iroquoians or the Neutral and the Algonquian-speaking Fire Nation (e.g., Warrick 1984:63; Pendergast 1993:25-26). However, given the likelihood that both alliance formation and conflict between individual communities was highly dynamic, it may be expected that both occurred at a broad range of scales.

The 1989-1990 excavations, despite their comparatively limited extent, have largely confirmed the traditional characterization of the Parsons site as indicative of the emergence of a large community along the middle reaches of the Humber watershed that had ties with other communities further afield. The nonceramic "exotic" trade goods recovered from the site over the past four decades attest to the fact that the Parsons community was integrated within far-reaching exchange systems, but they would appear to indicate that these networks were equally likely to have been oriented towards the west and the Upper Great Lakes, rather than toward eastern networks that converged on an emergent European system. It should also be noted that Parsons was perhaps no better situated with respect to these trade networks than other

roughly contemporaneous communities. Numerous fifteenth and sixteenth century assemblages include a similar number of copper artifacts that are of native origin (Fitzgerald 1990; Fox et al. 1995; Hancock et al. 1991). These data and the newly acquired calibrated radiocarbon dates firmly place the site in the fifteenth century rather than the mid-sixteenth century as previously estimated (Wright 1966:70; Ramsden 1977:72-73).

Likewise, even though the Parsons lithic industry has been characterized as exhibiting distinct similarities to Neutral sites (Ramsden 1977:281-282) and, in fact, over 99.7 percent of the chipped lithic assemblage recovered during the 1989-90 excavations consisted of Onondaga chert, the community would appear to have had no advantage over other late fifteenth-early sixteenth century villages situated near the north shore of Lake Ontario with respect to their access to Onondaga chert. Over 99 percent of the chert from the Boyle-Atkinson site, situated in Richmond Hill, was of the Onondaga variety (Poulton 1987:33), as was 97.8 percent of the chipped lithics at Draper (Poulton 1985:51) and 94 percent of the lithic material from Seed-Barker (Burgar 1988:25). The McKenzie-Woodbridge (Johnson 1980:86) and Keffer (Robert Pearce, personal communication 1995) lithic assemblages also primarily consist of Onondaga chert. The Parsons lithic industry has previously been interpreted to reflect Neutral incursions into the Humber region (Ramsden 1977:284) while the large quantities of Onondaga chert at Draper, in combination with low quantities of Neutral ceramic types (representing "captive brides"), has been seen to indicate the genesis of formal alliances that led to the generally peaceful relations between the Huron and Neutral during the seventeenth century (Finlayson 1985:440). Therefore, use of an abundance of Onondaga chert to postulate particularly close Neutral affiliations must be questioned. There is little compelling evidence that Late Iroquoian communities on the north shore of Lake Ontario experienced undue restrictions in access to high quality chert from primary sources in the Niagara frontier and along the north shore of Lake Erie. The economic and social logistics of chert acquisition are likely to have been complex, but remain largely unstudied for the Late Woodland period. For the seventeenth century, however, it may be noted

that there is little evidence that would suggest that the Neutral exerted strict control over the Onondaga sources (Cooper 1996:22).

A western, possibly Neutral, occupation of the site had also been postulated on the basis of the predominance of concave interior profiles on the ceramic vessels recovered from the site (Williamson and Powis, this volume). While almost fifty percent of the vessels from the ASI investigations were thought to have concave interior profiles, the vessels from other middle Humber area sites also have relatively significant percentages of concave profiles (>30 percent for Black Creek, Downsview and Riseborough), even given possible observer discrepancies in the recording of this attribute (Ramsden 1977:143-144). Also, concave interiors characterize almost 33 percent of the vessels at Keffer (Smith 1991:36). It is interesting to note, however, that *by way* of comparison, the upper Humber sites all have frequencies of 20 percent or less, suggesting that there are indeed two communities on the Humber, each of which had a different ceramic manufacturing tradition, which had been present for at least one hundred years.

These latter findings are of considerable significance, as they — together with the accumulation of a considerable body of data from throughout southern Ontario in the time that has elapsed since the first detailed considerations of the site's significance (e.g., Emerson 1968; Ramsden 1977, 1978) — have provided an opportunity to re-examine certain interpretations or general assumptions concerning both the site itself and the degree to which it is representative of the growth of more complex and extensive socio-political structures during the Late Ontario Iroquoian period. While previous investigators of the site all concluded that the site was large and dated to the early to mid-sixteenth century, the 1989-1990 excavations have allowed us to determine that the site was well defended, well planned and inhabited for a considerable length of time during the mid-late fifteenth century. The patterns of the house structures and palisade at Parsons also enable us to draw comparisons between this site and other comparably sized and contemporaneous sites such as Draper (Finlayson 1985). It is entirely conceivable that both of these sites and others like them represent early forms of the tribal polities that eventually relocated to Simcoe County to

join with the populations already established there and which were, perhaps, also undergoing a similar process of population movement and consolidation during the mid- to late fifteenth century (Warrick and Molnar 1986:26). The rather elaborate defensive strategies evident at Parsons and Draper, may attest to significant tension within and between these communities, prior to their migration northward. Whether this tension was simply inherent

to tribal villages living in close proximity to one another, or was caused by some other factor, within another hundred years they had allied to become significant components of the Huron Confederacy, one of the largest and best documented political networks of seventeenth century North America. It is likely that detailed explanations for the inception of those alliances will only emerge with the efforts of another fifty years of archaeological work.